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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PROTESTANTS WANT CHANGE

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Prominent Belarusian Protestant leaders recently described for Ambassador their continued registration problems and the increasing hostility that they face from the GOB. Most of the leaders agreed that their communities are ready to bring change to Belarus, claiming that young Protestant followers actively participated in the post-Election demonstrations. End Summary

¶2. (SBU) On April 13, Ambassador hosted a luncheon for the leaders of the most prominent Belarusian Protestant denominations, including Union of Evangelic Faith Christians (Pentecostal) senior bishop Sergei Khomich, Association of Senior Bishops of Evangelical Christian Churches Advisor Ivan Pashkevich, Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches Alexander Sakovich, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches Bishop Nikolai Sinkovets, and Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Confederation of Adventists Vasili Lozhechnik.

Political Protestantism is the Way to Change In Belarus

¶3. (C) Most of the Protestant leaders wanted to discuss politics with Ambassador. They claimed that many of their congregations have become politically active. The leaders noted that a number of their young members participated in the demonstrations that followed the March 19 presidential elections. They estimated that Protestants comprised approximately 3,000 (i.e. one-fourth) of the demonstrators on October Square.

¶4. (C) The Protestant bishops stressed that the Belarusian people want and are ready for change. Many of the leaders felt strongly the only way Belarus can become free is for it to become Protestant. Association of Senior Bishops of Evangelical Christian Churches Advisor Ivan Pashkevich stated the traditional political parties fail to motivate people to work for change. Instead, he claimed the churches are able to inspire the masses, which is why he plans to establish a Christian political party.

Increasing Hostility from the GOB

¶5. (C) While the leaders admitted that Protestant religious communities are far better off now than under Soviet repression, they also told Ambassador they fear that their

situation in Belarus may be worsening. They described greater hostility from the authorities, who consider Protestants not only to be American agents, but the state's most formidable enemy after the political opposition. The state-backed Russian Orthodox Church often speaks out against its Protestant counterparts. GOB efforts to establish ideological control over society strongly affect the Protestants as Protestant children suffer for their refusals to join GOB youth organizations. Union of Evangelical Christian Baptist Churches Bishop Nikolai Sinkovets told Ambassador of a child from a Protestant family who categorically refused to join the state-run youth union (BRSM), saying that her religion did not allow her to be a part of a communist-atheistic group. While Sinkovets was proud of the child's strong religious convictions, he now fears for her academic future.

Problems with Land and Registration Continue

¶6. (C) The authorities use various "Catch 22" technical reasons to deny Protestants the ability to build new churches, to use private homes for services, to obtain registration, or to proselytize in the countryside. The GOB mandates that the religious communities be registered at a judicial (i.e., non-residential) address in order to carry out religious activities. These judicial addresses, however, are almost all state owned. In addition, few non-residential addresses for rent or sale exist outside of Minsk, thereby leaving religious communities in villages or the regions at an impasse. Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Confederation of Adventists Vasili Lozhechnik, who was far less political than his colleagues, described in fascinating but sad detail the insidious ways the authorities used registration to limit his religious community's work, especially in the Borisov region. The GOB will not rent or sell the existing places to the Protestant communities, nor will it allow them to buy land to build a building for a church. Union of Evangelic Faith Christians (Pentecostal) senior bishop Sergei Khomich told Ambassador about one religious community that has been waiting for 12 years for the GOB to decide whether it can purchase a piece of land for its followers. Protestant religious communities are forced to operate illegally, although local authorities are fully aware of what these groups are doing.

Comment

¶7. (C) These Protestant leaders, with their already established network of communities across the country, appear committed to work for political change in Belarus. Although they were not part of the "official" opposition efforts in the lead up to the presidential elections, many Protestant believers participated in the demonstrations. Moreover, the strained relationship with the current regime may be providing even more incentive for Protestants to join the struggle. It remains unclear, however, whether the political parties, and the Ten Plus Coalition in particular, will accept the Protestant communities and other non-political groups as partners in the struggle for change in Belarus. Protestants remain a fraction of the population although they are the fastest growing religious organizations in the country. Many Belarusians view Protestants and Protestantism as "foreign" despite Protestantism's roots in Belarus dating back to the Reformation. We suspect if the Protestant congregations became too politically active or established their own party as Pashkevich claimed, they may face even more hostility from the regime and perhaps from ordinary Belarusians, who believe religion and politics should be kept separate.

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